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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000422

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TAGS: PREL PTER AG

SUBJECT: MFA OFFICIAL: SAHEL HEATS UP AS MALI PLAYS  
"UNHELPFUL" ROLE

REF: A. BAMAKO 357  
¶B. BAMAKO 366

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: In an April 13 meeting, MFA Director General (Assistant Secretary equivalent) for African Affairs Ismail Chergui told Ambassador that Algeria perceives that the security situation in northern Mali and Niger is deteriorating. Chergui said Algeria was frustrated by the "unhelpful" role played by Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT), who claimed he was committed to the Algiers Accords peace agreement but did not back words up with action, according to Chergui. Chergui confirmed that the Algerians have informed the Malian government that Algeria will no longer work to implement the Algiers Accords. Chergui said he didn't anticipate Algeria would change its (annoyed) stance in the immediate future, but he confirmed that the Malian foreign minister is due in Algiers April 15. According to Chergui, Algeria was also fed up with the role played by Libya, charging that the Libyans had paid ransom to the Tuaregs to resolve hostage situations, money that was being used to arm and fuel the growing conflict in northern Mali. The Ambassador told Chergui we are concerned about areas in the Sahel that are unstable and ungoverned and can be used by al-Qaida in the Maghreb as staging areas. The U.S. is anxious, therefore, to build up the capacity of Sahel states to control their borders, and Algeria has a similar interest. Ideally we would do more security-related training activities on a multilateral basis, the Ambassador observed. Chergui agreed with the Ambassador that multilateral exercises in the Sahel were preferable to bilateral activity, as all parties involved, including the U.S, "need to speak the same language" in order to avoid being played off of one another by either the Tuaregs or the government of Mali. Chergui also said Algeria shares the U.S. primary goal of fighting AQIM in the Sahel. He commented, however, that Algeria was bothered that ATT seemed to lack the political will to focus on anything other than fighting the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali. END SUMMARY.

ALGERIA PULLS OUT OF ACCORDS, BLAMES MALI

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¶12. (C) Chergui told us that Algeria had informed the government of Mali on April 10 that it was withdrawing from the Algiers Accords (see ref A). He stated flatly that "we do not want to be involved and will no longer help in

implementation and negotiation." Chergui said that Mali and its president must bear the responsibility for actions Algeria felt were insincere and unhelpful to peace. Chergui continued that Algeria had not yet decided whether to pull its observers out of the northern Mali city of Kidal. The Algerian decision, according to Chergui, provoked an immediate reaction from the Malians, as Chergui expected a Malian delegation to arrive in Algiers on April 15, consisting of the foreign minister and intel chief, among others.

¶3. (C) Charging that ATT, who "is king there and can do whatever he wants," lacked the political will to carry out Mali's commitments under the Accords, Chergui said that ATT was not focused on fighting AQIM and terrorism but rather on fighting the Tuareg rebellion led by Ibrahim ag Bahanga. Citing specific examples given by Algerian observers in Kidal, Chergui said that ATT had failed to win the trust of the local population in and around Kidal. For one thing, ATT promised to remove a military barracks in the city, but had not done so. Chergui said it was well known to everyone in the region that Kidal's unpopular governor and regional military commander needed to be replaced in order to calm the situation and help win over the local population. He said that ATT had shown no will to replace either man, and, instead of making conciliatory gestures, had actually sent in its elite "berets rouges" forces into the region, demonstrating a will to fight rather than adhere to the Accords. Finally, Chergui charged that ATT had done nothing to stimulate the economic development of the Kidal region, further prompting locals to sympathize with the Bahanga rebellion.

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SAHEL SECURITY DETERIORATES

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¶4. (C) Chergui told us that the Malian interior minister visited Algeria last July as part of a united delegation that included Tuaregs. At that point, Chergui said, Algeria felt reasonably confident that the peace agreement would hold, and its role as mediator was clear. However, he said, no sooner had the delegation returned to Mali than ATT sent the military into the northern region, a highly visible act which "insulted" Bahanga and the local Tuareg population. Following this, Assane Fagaga, a colonel responsible for a special military unit in Kidal, deserted and joined Bahanga, taking some 60 fighters with him. According to Chergui, the Algerian observers in Kidal have seen many more people leaving Kidal in the months since Fagaga's departure, afraid of the military. Many of these people have joined Bahanga, according to Chergui, because ATT has continued to militarize the region and failed to make conciliatory gestures to convince locals and Algerian observers alike that he is sincere in seeking peace.

¶5. (C) Two days prior to our meeting, Chergui said that the Mali army had killed two Tuaregs, one of whom was a commander and whose throat had been slit (see ref B). A frustrated Chergui said that the fight against AQIM was suffering because of Mali's preoccupation with the Tuareg rebellion. "This could have been resolved long ago," Chergui said, if Mali had acted less aggressively. "Believe me," Chergui said, referring to AQIM in northern Mali, "the Malians know where they are" and could easily send troops to fight terrorists instead of the rebels.

ALGERIAN ASSISTANCE IN THE SAHEL

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¶6. (C) Chergui provided us with some insight into Algeria's cooperation and assistance programs in the Sahel region. He said that Algeria has active border and customs training programs with both Mali and Niger, with a primary goal of border control and enforcement. He insisted that Algeria

provides some food aid to the Tuaregs but nothing more, and was adamant that it certainly provides no military assistance. (Note: We have not yet asked the same question of Algeria's security services. End note.) Saying Algeria has a "great" security and training relationship with Mali and Niger, Chergui said that Algeria was providing "almost all" of the Nigerien army's fuel needs in northern Niger, as Niger "is a very weak state." Chergui confided an Algerian preference for dealing with Niger, as he found them to be "more honest." He explained by saying that Niger "had fewer friends" while Mali had many, which allowed ATT to play them off of each other, he said. Because Algerian assistance to the Tuareg was limited to food and humanitarian aid, Chergui said that Algeria was also upset by "unfair treatment" in the Malian press, which has blamed Algeria for fanning the flames of the Bahanga rebellion.

#### THE LIBYAN FACTOR

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¶ 7. (C) Algeria was upset that Mali and Tuaregs alike had talked to Libya as an alternative and informal mediator, Chergui said that under the Algiers Accords, Algeria was supposed to fill this role. Chergui charged that the Libyans had not helped the situation either by paying the Tuaregs over USD 3 million recently to resolve a hostage situation. This money, he said, goes directly to buy arms and strengthen the Tuareg rebellion against the Mali government, further contributing to instability and creating a lucrative hostage market in the Sahel. Libya, Chergui conceded, "may have good intentions," but seems to lack the ability to carry them out. He referred to recent discussions in Tripoli with an unofficial Tuareg spokesperson which had been diverted to "discussions of autonomy" for the Tuaregs, something Chergui asserted Algeria does not support and which is not part of the Algiers Accords.

#### CROSS-BORDER LINKAGES

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¶ 8. (C) In the vast Sahel region where national borders are inexact and largely theoretical, Chergui pointed out that the same unofficial Tuareg spokesperson representing the Tuaregs in Mali was also related by a family marriage to the Tuaregs in northern Niger. Chergui asserted that Algeria was aware of several hostage situations in northern Mali in which the hostages had ultimately been held by the Movement for Justice in Niger (MNJ) in northern Niger. According to Chergui, the government of Niger viewed the MNJ as mere "drug dealers" and as such would not talk to them. Chergui claimed that the Nigerian president remained open to allowing the MNJ to become a political party, but at the same time, the MNJ was evolving, even demonstrating an ability to attack the capital. Chergui said that Algeria had offered mediation between the GoN and the MNJ as well, which the MNJ was ready to accept, but the situation remained deadlocked because the government still refused to talk to the MNJ.

¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador briefly reviewed discussions of the TSCTP meeting of ambassadors and Washington officials in

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Tunisia two weeks ago, highlighting our concern about the risk of ungoverned spaces that provide opportunities to groups such as AQIM. The Ambassador pointed to State Department Anti-Terrorism Assistance programs in areas like border controls that ideally would involve Algeria with Mali and Niger. Above all, the Ambassador noted, we want to help develop a capacity among the Sahel states to control their own borders. Chergui applauded this and said Algeria should participate in border-training activities with its neighbors.

(Comment: He is not high enough ranking here to make such a decision, however. End Comment.) At the end of the meeting, Chergui pulled the Ambassador aside to note that while we

help build up the Malian forces, we should be insistent that those forces are deployed against AQIM and not the Tuaregs, as more fighting will not restore stability in the Malian North.

COMMENT: TOWARDS A REGIONAL APPROACH TO THE SAHEL

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¶10. (C) Chergui asked the U.S. to tell Bamako that Mali should not further destabilize the situation by militarizing the North and should be consistent to its commitments under the Algiers Accords. ATT, according to Chergui, needed to decide whether he favored a military option or not, and if he did, he should be clear about it and accept responsibility for the consequences. (Chergui seemed confident that Bamako would eventually understand no military solution is possible for the Tuareg problem.) Given the complex web of state and non-state actors in the Sahel, Chergui said that success depended on all primary actors giving the same message, including the U.S., particularly to avoid being played off of each other by AQIM and Tuareg rebels. He said Algeria supported a regional conference, in the form of a summit or heads of government meeting in Bamako, and the first such attempt at regional coordination should involve "those countries immediately concerned": Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Chad. In order to prepare for this meeting, Chergui said that Algeria supported Niger's offer to host a ministerial meeting in the near future, and was deferring to Niger on the logistics. Chergui agreed with the Ambassador's assessment that Algeria and the U.S. need to have a much deeper discussion of their perceptions of the Sahel state of play and what each is doing with the various Sahel states.

FORD